



## Cultural Elements, Tradition and Innovation on the Pottery of Santa María Atzompa, Oaxaca, México

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**Abstract:** Pottery is a cultural manifestation that has endured since pre-Hispanic times. This artisanal craft has been a source of identity for the community and an economic driver for the region. One of the most interesting aspects of this tradition is the role of women in the pottery community. Historically, women have been the main guardians of the techniques and knowledge passed down from generation to generation. Women, traditionally the guardians of pottery, have not only kept ancestral techniques alive but have also been at the forefront of innovation and adaptation. In this context, the analysis of pottery in Santa María Atzompa allows for exploring how an artisanal practice can serve as a model of sustainable development that balances tradition and modernity. Reflecting on Santa María Atzompa, it's evident that the community is a microcosm of tradition, innovation, and cultural resilience, with pottery at the heart of its identity and daily life. It's essential that these traditions are valued, preserved, and promoted for future generations.

**Keywords:** Pottery, Santa María Atzompa, Cultural resilience, Tradition

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## Introduction

The pottery of Santa María Atzompa, is located in the Central Valley of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, in 2020's total population was 41K inhabitants, with 52.4% being women and 47.6% being men. The most spoken indigenous languages were Zapotec (2,218 people), Mixtec (973 people), and Mixe (617 people). Warman (1988) has documented how traditional crafts, such as pottery, have transformed under the pressures of capitalism. However, in Oaxaca, this "commodification"

has gone hand in hand with community development. Commercialization, rather than being a mere transaction, has been intertwined with principles of solidarity economics, focusing not only on profit but on the well-being of the community (Meillassoux, 1971).

Pottery is a cultural manifestation that has endured since pre-Hispanic times. This artisanal craft has been a source of identity for the community and an economic driver for the region. The ceramics of Atzompa are recognized for their unique green color, achieved through the use of lead-based glazes, and for their designs, which have evolved to adapt to current market demands. However, pottery is not only a means of subsistence but also a vehicle for preserving and transmitting cultural values that strengthen the social fabric of the community. This cultural phenomenon is deeply rooted in the community, serving as a pillar of local identity and an economic livelihood for many families. Over the years, Atzompa has been recognized not only for the quality of its products but also for the resilience of its artisans, who have managed to keep this tradition alive despite the challenges of modernization (García Canclini, 1995).

One of the most interesting aspects of this tradition is the role of women in the pottery community. Historically, women have been the main guardians of the techniques and knowledge passed down from generation to generation. Women, traditionally the guardians of pottery, have not only kept ancestral techniques alive but have also been at the forefront of innovation and adaptation. Lévi-Strauss (1962) would remind us that in each piece of pottery, there is a language, a system of meanings. And it is through this language that female potters have articulated their role in society, gaining a place and voice in the public sphere, challenging the narrative of women being relegated to the domestic realm. Furthermore, today, female potters play a crucial role in the modernization of the craft, implementing new production methods and exploring alternative markets. As Cook (1970) mentions, variability in production and prices in artisanal industries is a central issue in economic anthropology, making this analysis particularly relevant from a contemporary perspective. This duality between the preservation of tradition and the pursuit of innovation has generated a unique dynamic that strengthens both the local economy and the social cohesion of the community. One of the key points of this study is the analysis of the changes that the Atzompa pottery production chain has undergone, from clay extraction to the commercialization of finished products. It has been documented that, over the years, the relationships between the various actors involved in this chain have evolved, adapting to new market demands. However, significant challenges persist, such as competition with

industrial products and fluctuations in the price of raw materials (Cook & Diskin, 1975).

In the same vein, the interaction between culture, economy, and gender in Santa María Atzompa is fundamental to understanding how this community has managed to adapt to global changes without losing its identity. Female potters, for example, not only contribute to their families' economic sustenance but also act as agents of change within the community. Through their work, they challenge traditional gender norms and promote greater equity in the distribution of roles within the community. This reinforces the idea that pottery is, in many ways, an activity that structures and defines the social life of the community (Stephen, 1998).

In this context, the analysis of pottery in Santa María Atzompa allows for exploring how an artisanal practice can serve as a model of sustainable development that balances tradition and modernity. This balance is key to the survival of many artisanal communities around the world that face similar pressures to adapt to changes without losing their cultural roots. Thus, Atzompa pottery is not only relevant as an economic activity but also as an example of cultural resilience.

Material culture, represented by ceramics, becomes a vehicle for expressing identity and resistance in the face of globalization. According to García Canclini (1995), consumption and artisanal production in indigenous communities are a form of cultural vindication against the homogenization imposed by the global market. In this sense, the potters of Atzompa not only produce objects of aesthetic value but also keep alive a tradition that reflects the history and values of their community. Community development in Santa María Atzompa is deeply tied to pottery. This craft not only provides a source of income but also strengthens community bonds and allows for the transmission of values, knowledge, and skills across generations (BonfilBatalla, 1990).

In this generational exchange, "local knowledge" becomes significant, as it ensures the persistence and adaptation of tradition (Geertz, 1973). However, innovation and adaptability also play a crucial role. Thus, "solidarity economics" and "fair trade" become tools to preserve tradition while simultaneously adapting to the challenges of the modern world (Sen, 1999; Nusbaum, 2000).

## **Objective**

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This research aims to explore the relationship between tradition and innovation in the context of pottery in Santa María Atzompa. Through an in-depth analysis of

the community's cultural and economic dynamics, the goal is to understand how artisans, particularly women, manage the tensions between preserving their ancestral techniques and the need to adapt to modern markets. This analysis is grounded in a multidisciplinary approach, combining anthropological, economic, and gender perspectives. An essential point addressed in this study is the impact of globalization on artisanal production in Atzompa. The integration of this community into global markets has brought both opportunities and challenges. While Atzompa pottery has managed to reach new markets and expand its commercial presence, it also faces fierce competition from industrialized products that threaten the economic sustainability of local artisans.

## Major Findings

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The commercialization of ceramics is a key factor in the economy of Santa María Atzompa. Historically, local and regional markets have been the primary sales channels for the artisans' products. However, in recent decades, the opening of international markets has allowed potters to access a much broader customer base, encouraging innovation in designs and production techniques.

Similarly, the interaction between artisans and intermediaries is fundamental to understanding the commercial dynamics of pottery in Atzompa. While intermediaries facilitate access to larger markets, they also create a dependency relationship that can negatively affect artisans' incomes. In many cases, potters depend on intermediaries to sell their products in larger markets, creating a dynamic of dependency that directly affects the artisans' earnings. This issue is particularly relevant in the context of globalization, where competition with industrial products has increased the vulnerability of artisanal producers (Benitez, 2017). The role of women in this process is crucial. Not only are they responsible for much of the ceramic production, but they also play a fundamental role in the commercialization of the products and the transmission of techniques and knowledge to younger generations. This active participation of women in the local economy challenges traditional gender norms and promotes greater equity in the distribution of roles within the community.

The research also explores the environmental impact of pottery production in Atzompa. The extraction of clay and the use of kilns to fire ceramics have raised concerns about the sustainability of this activity in the long term. Although some artisans have adopted more sustainable practices, such as using energy-efficient kilns, many still use traditional methods that have a considerable environmental

impact. The sustainability of artisanal production is a topic that requires urgent attention, especially in a context where environmental concerns are increasingly important on a global scale. While some potters have adopted more sustainable practices, such as using energy-efficient kilns, others continue to use more traditional techniques that are less environmentally friendly (Hernández & Pacheco, 2014).

In terms of methodology, this work is based on an ethnographic approach, using participant observation techniques and semi-structured interviews with local potters. Through this approach, it has been possible to capture the complexity of the social and economic interactions underlying the production of ceramics in Atzompa. As Thompson (2006) mentions, the study of symbolic forms allows for understanding how material objects, in this case, ceramics, mediate social relations and contribute to the construction of cultural meanings.

Pottery in Atzompa should also be understood in the context of public policies that have impacted the development of rural communities in Mexico. Over the past few decades, various government initiatives have sought to promote economic development by supporting artisanal industries. However, these efforts have been inconsistent, and in many cases, artisans have faced significant obstacles in accessing these support programs (Nahmad, 2010).

This balance between tradition and innovation is what allows Atzompa pottery to remain a relevant activity both economically and culturally. However, to ensure its long-term sustainability, it is necessary to implement policies that support artisans in their process of adapting to global markets while promoting the preservation of the values and knowledge that have made Atzompa pottery a cultural heritage of great value.

### **Tradition in Pottery**

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The pottery tradition of Santa María Atzompadataes back to pre-Hispanic times. Archaeological remains indicate that pottery in Atzompa has roots that trace back to the classic period of Monte Albán (approximately 500 B.C. to 800 A.D.). During the pre-Hispanic period, Atzompa was a major pottery production center for the Monte Albán region, one of the principal Mesoamerican cities of the time. Pieces produced in Atzompa are often characterized by their green color (“green clay”) thanks to a special technique that involves applying a lead-based glaze on red clay, giving it a bright green hue after being fired.



Image 1: Santa Maria Atzompa'S Traditional Pottery

### Innovation in Pottery

With the Spanish conquest and the introduction of new techniques and materials, pottery in Atzompa began to evolve, incorporating new styles and shapes. With its dark green color and enhanced creativity, craftsmen produce jugs, which they decorate with designs that mimic birds or flowers; pots that depict bats, coyotes, deer, or dogs; orchestras where each musician is an animal representative of the jungle; and small-sized dishes, which are also clay toys, often purchased for showcase display. (Martínez, 1972)



Image 2. Santa Maria Atzompa'S Traditional Pottery

## Community Organization and Gender

The Union of Craftsmen and Potters of Santa María Atzompa, Centro, Oaxaca, A.C., founded on October 12, 1998 with 12 members, laid the foundation for the establishment of the “La Asunción” Crafts Market, an economic organization that encompasses over 100 artisan producers. Additionally, there is the Union of Independent Craftsmen of the town of Santa María Atzompa, which is composed by more than two hundred independent craftsmen (Arellanes and Reyes, 2011, p. 48).



Image 3: Santa Maria Atzompa's "Casa de la artesanía"

There exists a subtle yet significant balance in the lives of female artisans, who are also active members in the socio-economic aspects within their families and communities. Typically, a potter produces the necessary utilitarian pottery items to generate an income, but not so many as to become overwhelmed by the task. A potter is also a mother (in some villages, pottery is a male trade, but traditionally it is women who engage in pottery work). The potter is thus a sister, a daughter, and a participant in civic events, potters' assemblies, and village ceremonies. Therefore, as much value is given to her fulfillment of social roles as to her income generation. The leadership of female potters has been crucial in solidifying women's participation

in collective decision-making within the artisanal sector at both state and regional levels.

This is also reflected in the marketing of crafts, anchoring the conceptual foundation with four fundamental pillars of innovation in pottery: assemblies, parity, collaborative work, and commercialization.

## Conclusions

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After discussing various aspects of Santa María Atzompa, Oaxaca, and its pottery tradition, the main conclusions and highlighted elements would be:

- Tradition and Deep Roots
- Women as a Central Pillar
- Innovation and Tradition
- Economy and Fair Trade
- Worldview and Cultural Significance
- Current Challenges

Reflecting on Santa María Atzompa, it's evident that the community is a microcosm of tradition, innovation, and cultural resilience, with pottery at the heart of its identity and daily life. It's essential that these traditions are valued, preserved, and promoted for future generations.

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